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Carols, Tableaux, Incidental Music, etc.

By C. E. HOWELL

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ON
PAGEANTS IN CHURCH

(Carols, Tableaux, Incidental Music, etc.)

ANSWERED BY

C. E. HOWELL

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INTRODUCTION

WHETHER you aim at a simple series of carols illustrated by tableaux, or whether you are producing a full-dress pageant, the questions which follow will provide food for thought and suggestions for improvement.

This is a 'check-list.' First, rough out your pageant, then examine it, point by point, by means of the questions which follow: they will prompt 'second thoughts' on many matters. As a result of this examination, against the implied criticisms of an impartial questioner, you will be able to decide whether your pageant is as good as you can make it.

A well-composed, carefully rehearsed pageant conveys a powerful message. In these days of 'visual-aids' we are accustomed to standards of clarity and smoothness that are very high indeed. We cannot afford uncertainty or hesitations in setting forth any part of the teachings of the Church.

There is a vital difference between a service and a pageant. There is a gap between the literary and the dramatic. It is said of many dramatic works which are fascinating to read that they do not 'play' well. The gap has not been bridged. These questions are meant to assist in moving from the literary to the dramatic. They will help to bridge the gap.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

THE SCRIPT

1. How many copies of the script have you made?
2. Have you a prompt copy?

THE MUSIC

3. How many of the hymns and carols are in the same key, or the same metre?
4. Have the musical items been 'cut to fit'?

THE STAGE

5. Is there sufficient contrast between the background against which the characters are to be seen, and the characters themselves?
6. Are the characters high enough to be seen by all the members of the congregation?

THE LIGHTING

7. Can every detail be seen from the back of the church?
8. Are all the lights controlled from one point?

THE COSTUMES

9. What do the costumes look like from the back of the church?
10. How are the costumes to be hung before, during, and between pageants?

THE PROPERTIES

11. How big are the properties?
12. Do the properties really help to suggest the character?

THE GROUPING

13. Does the principal character in each scene really dominate it?
14. Is the focus of attention always in the same spot?

THE CHOIR

15. Is the choir to be seen?
16. Will the choir need to see their music when the rest of the lights are dimmed?

THE NARRATOR

17. If the Narrator is to be hidden, can he be heard clearly from every part of the church?
18. If the Narrator is in full view, what does he do when the focus of attention goes away from him?

THE CONGREGATION

19. Is the congregation's part clearly set out so that every member knows exactly when to join in as an active part of the pageant?

20. What is the last picture in the minds of the congregation as they leave the church?

POSTSCRIPT

THE SCRIPT

1. *How many copies of the script have you made?*

Many of the irritating delays and minor faults in performances of every kind are due to uncertainty. It is essential that every performer should know exactly what to do at each moment. It is also essential that every non-performing member should be equally definite. The narrator, the organist, the choir, the persons in charge of the lighting, of the costumes, and of the properties, and the director of the pageant should each have a copy with their own functions clearly underlined. The small trouble of duplicating copies of the script will be amply compensated by the gain in confidence of those who have any part to play in the finished pageant.

2. *Have you a prompt copy?*

You may write your pageant as carefully as you will. You may make due allowance for every foreseeable factor, and note it in the script before you commence rehearsals. You will never arrive at the dress rehearsal without wishing to alter your original ideas—sometimes extensively. One copy of the script should be interleaved with blank pages, and one person deputed to stand always at the side of the director, making an immediate note of every change from the original plan. This 'prompt-copy' will form the master work from which the music, lights, and properties plots can be run off in the confidence that they will be correct and up to the minute.

THE MUSIC

3. *How many of the hymns and carols are in the same key, or the same metre?*

It is surprising how many tunes are written in the keys of F and G, and how many verses are in 'eight and six.' It is worth a little time and trouble to discover alternatives. Although the visual factor is paramount in a pageant, the music has a vital part to play in setting and underlining the mood. It is a pity if the underlining serves to emphasize monotony rather than variety.

4. *Have the musical items been 'cut to fit'?*

Many hymns and carols refer to more than one scene or idea. If one of these is to be used to illustrate a particular phase of the pageant, it is best to omit the irrelevant verses altogether. Where any piece of music is to accompany movement, it is essential that it be timed with that movement, and 'cut to fit.' Nothing so distracts from the dignity of a procession as a sudden hurrying to get to the goal in time with the music. Few things are more irritating to those not actively engaged than having to wait while long, apparently needless sections of music are being played or sung.

THE STAGE

5. *Is there sufficient contrast between the background against which the characters are to be seen, and the characters themselves?*

Many of the characters are likely to be in somewhat drab costumes—e.g. shepherds—and may easily fade away into a dull background. If the characters are to appear on an open stage, it may be found that it is those in very light costume which tend to vanish. Much may be done by trimming the edges of garments with contrasting colours, so that it is quite clear where the costume ends and the background begins.

6. *Are the characters high enough to be seen by all the members of the congregation?*

A height of stage that seems in an empty church to give perfect visibility may be found inadequate when the church is full, with the heads and shoulders of the congregation almost blotting out the platform from the back of the building.

THE LIGHTING

7. *Can every detail be seen from the back of the church?*

When directing the rehearsals of a pageant, it is usual to do so from fairly near the stage. The grouping that seems effective from ten yards may seem a muddled mass from twice the distance, and everything should be checked from the farthest possible point. If additional lighting is needed, it can be provided in two ways—by extra equipment, or by higher-powered bulbs. In either case, get expert advice. It is highly dangerous to overload a circuit, or to have loose cables lying about the stage.

8. *Are all the lights controlled from one point?*

This really means *all* the lights, in the body of the church, in the choir stalls, in the pulpit, and on the stage. If they are not so controlled, it is essential to do three things. First, to provide a copy of the script for each light point, with the instructions clearly marked. Secondly, to have a separate person at each point. Thirdly, to rehearse the lighting changes thoroughly. Few things are so distracting as lights being switched off and on at the wrong moments.

THE COSTUMES

9. *What do the costumes look like from the back of the church?*

Most pageant costumes, especially hired ones, carry too much detail. Seen from close at hand, they are impressive and rich-looking. From the back of the church most of the detail is lost, and the effect is merely smudgy. Simple lines and clear colours, with bold ornament or none at all, will carry the effect to the furthest corner of the church. Suit the colour to the character, and thus have the main part of the costume right. Much of the customary detail can be omitted.

10. *How are the costumes to be hung before, during, and between pageants?*

For each character to take charge of his own costume is risky. To have them hung in the right order in a room in which they can easily be checked and, if necessary, repaired is safer. Simple hangers can be made from foot-long pieces of wood each carrying a cup-hook. Rows of cup-hooks will support them in any chosen order. Definite instructions regarding the hanging of costumes should be pinned up in the dressing-room, and the person in charge should have enough authority to see that these are carried out. If this is done, the second and third performances will go as smoothly as the first.

THE PROPERTIES

11. *How big are the properties?*

Distance has a dwarfing effect. A spear that would be very useful in battle may look like a toy from twenty yards. All properties should be easily seen from the maximum distance. If this is impossible, discard the property and think of something else that will do in its place.

12. *Do the properties really help to suggest the character?*

The question is not 'Would such a character have such a piece of property?', but 'Is this piece of property essential to the character?' Too many properties are a handicap. They must be checked at every performance. They must be carried all the time, even if they make movement awkward. They must be carefully arranged in every scene, and if one character gets his out of line with the rest, the eyes of the congregation will follow this sword or spear or crook, and let the rest of the picture go by.

THE GROUPING

13. *Does the principal character in each scene really dominate it?*

There are two simple methods of ensuring this. One is to put the principal character on a rostrum, thus raising him physically above the rest. Differences of height are good in themselves, tending to avoid monotony, but they are better if they give point to the action. Another method of marking out the principal character is to stand him a little away from the rest and to arrange the grouping and the properties so that he is at the apex of a triangle—preferably not dead centre—when the eyes of the congregation will be led back to him in whatever direction they may stray.

14. *Is the focus of attention always in the same spot?*

If the chief character in the first scene is 'right centre,' in the second the focus should be elsewhere. Use both sides of the stage, the front and the back, the floor and the rostrum, in different ways at different times. Alternate large, crowded scenes with small, intimate ones. Wherever you may have planned your centre of attention for the last scene of all, keep away from it in all the others. Whatever kind of grouping it is to have, avoid setting up the same group beforehand.

THE CHOIR

15. *Is the choir to be seen?*

There are points in favour of having the choir in full view. There are advantages to be gained from concealing the singers completely. There is nothing whatever to be said for allowing partial glimpses of the choir. If they are to be in full view, make sure that they do not move (e.g. to stand) when there is any action taking place on the stage. The singers are supposed to be assisting the action, not taking part in it.

16. *Will the choir need to see their music when the rest of the lights are dimmed?*

It is worth while spending time and thought on this matter. To install special lighting is expensive. To have the choir lights on when the main action is on the stage is distracting. Careful planning, adequate rehearsal, screening the organ lights where necessary, and using the choir lights to mark off sections of the pageant will all help to overcome the difficulty.

THE NARRATOR

17. *If the Narrator is to be hidden, can he be heard clearly from every part of the church?*

If not, and it is necessary to use a microphone and loudspeaker system, it is better to have several speakers working at half-power in different parts of the building than to have one working at full power in an effort to reach the furthest point. This sets up unwanted echoes, and may be almost unendurable for those unfortunate enough to be seated close to the speaker.

18. *If the Narrator is in full view, what does he do when the focus of attention goes away from him?*

Is he to move on and off the scene like a Greek chorus? Has he a place set aside for his exclusive use? If so, is there some seating arrangement which will enable him to rest at times, but which will avoid a kind of jack-in-the-box effect whenever he rises to speak his lines. Does he control his own lighting—a very good plan since it ensures synchronization with his movements?

THE CONGREGATION

19. *Is the congregation's part clearly set out so that every member knows exactly when to join in as an active part of the pageant?*

Uncertainty on this score will spoil the best of pageants. The congregation cannot keep their attention on what is happening before them if they are looking round at one another and hoping that they will remember to stand and sit in the right places. If the cost is not too great a printed outline is of great value, especially if it carries the words which the congregation is to sing or say. Do not be too anxious to have the congregation joining in. If the pageant is good, they will be with the characters in spirit. If it is bad, no amount of standing and sitting, of singing and reciting, will save it. Let the congregation put themselves in the right mood by means of an opening hymn. If it fits the pageant, let them join with the choir in a final song of praise. Do not interrupt the action just for the sake of 'bringing them in.'

20. *What is the last picture in the minds of the congregation as they leave the church?*

This is the one which they will remember best. It is worth while making sure that it conveys your message. Too many otherwise good pageants overshadow a memorable final scene with valedictory sentences or closing hymns. If the congregation cannot fittingly join in the last scene of the pageant, then let that speak for itself.

POSTSCRIPT

Re-examine the script with two thoughts in your mind:

(a) *Clarity* Is everything crystal clear to everyone who will be present in any capacity?

(b) *Contrast* Is there contrast in colour, in speed, in grouping, and in every possible way?

Your greatest enemies are uncertainty and monotony. Your most powerful allies are clarity and contrast.

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